Special Consultation on Obtaining References from The OU: Interim Report

1: Introduction

This consulation was triggered in part by The OU reviewing its process of providing references for students who request one, as well as by students nominating this topic for consultation, on the forum for this purpose. The consultation took place between 24 November to 5 December 2016 and the summary was posted to the forum on 16 December 2016. The complete record of the discussion and the summary can be viewed on the forum.

2: Background

The Academic Services Leadership Team (ASLT) commissioned the Reference Review in 2016. Its purpose was to investigate and put forward recommendations about the future operation of this area of work. One of the early actions of the References Review Group was to organise a special student consultation to gather feedback from students about what aspects of the current system and process worked well and what areas needed to be improved. This piece of work has allowed the Review Group to gain an incredibly rich insight into the views of our students on a topic area that may not necessarily appear controversial in the first instance.

There is a great deal of concern in the student community about how effective the university is in supporting students to link their academic achievement to one of the core OU strategic objectives; i.e. Enhanced Employability and Career Progression. Students see the academic reference as that link, whether it be for employment or further study requirements.

Students were realistic in what they expect the university to be able to do about this issue and therefore offered suggested solutions on how the provision of references could be improved and made more consistent for students. Some of these solutions are mentioned in the recommendations outlined below.

In response to a suggestion raised on the consultation forum, the References Review Group also sought direct student representation and Nicola Simpson, Deputy President of the OU Students Association has joined the group.

Acting on student feedback gathered through the consultation, the Review Group has put together the recommendations below, which will be taken to ASLT for formal discussion and approval.

3: Developments to Date

While this review has been going on, there have already been a number of changes and improvements made to the creation and development of academic references.
Over the past 3 months or so, the responsibility for the creation and development of academic references has moved.

At the same time, there has been a concerted effort to develop a more consistent way of working across this area of work. This has been successful including

1.   Separating out emails about references as they come in.
2.   Creatinga set of consistent procedures for references
3.   Moving towards the use of one set of reference templates
4.   Making minor changes to the Reference tool/wizard (with more to come)

4: Recommendations

Below is a series of recommendations concerning the provision of Academic References for OU students. In particular we wish to address the consistency and quality of practice, the dealing with and provision of Post Graduate (PG) and research based reference requests and those required for particular areas of employment (such as Law).

4.1) Provision of tutor comments

This was a key idea put forward by students and proposes the automatic production of tutor comments/views at the end of modules, which are gathered and filed electronically for each individual. This would get around the difficulty of tutors being available (or able) to comment on an individual student's academic ability after a lapse of 2 or more years (which is an unrealistic timeframe given a part-time degree takes 6 years to complete).
There are a number of options that fall under this possibility including:
- For all modules, students receive a comment from the tutor once they have completed;
- Comments are provided for level 3 study only;
- All students on a qualification are written to (once they start level 3 study) and invited to inform us of their future plans. Those that choose Employment or Further Study will allow us time to pre-prepare a suitable academic reference.

The group recommend the investigation into the above to ascertain which if any of the options are achievable taking into consideration potential IT impact and resource implications etc.

4.2) Clear and robust process for collaboration with faculties when dealing with PG and research reference requests

The existing method of dealing with these more specialist reference requests has always been ad hoc, rather than a formal process. The move away from locations to a more centralised environment has highlighted this issue.

The group recommend direct and formal consultation/collaboration with faculties in order for this issue to be resolved (and formalised?).

4.3) Centralised Team for dealing with academic reference requests

The group felt that the option of a central team to deal with academic reference requests should be considered, as this would enable staff to develop expertise and knowledge, especially for the more advanced/complicated types of queries and therefore provide a better experience for our students.

An alternative would be for a virtual team to be developed which would enable staff (although separated by location) to develop expertise and knowledge through regular meetings, workshops etc.

4.4) Significant resource to provide IT solutions:
It was felt by the group that there are many ways that IT could be used to streamline student requests for references and evidence of study options, such as:

- Significantly rework the wizard to make it clearer and better able to process the various options available to students,
- Investigate automation options where tutor comments aren't required..

4.5) Full project to support the recommendations mentioned above.

The group is recommending the setting up of a formal project to investigate and research the recommendations mentioned above in more detail.

5: Next Steps

The recommendations outlined above will be considered by ASLT and we will update you again when further progress has been made.